

# To Life!

## Abortion doctor who turned pro-life to become a Catholic

By Tracy Early  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Bernard N. Nathanson, the former abortion doctor whose 1979 book "Aborting America" told of his change to a pro-life position, has written a new book on his decision to become a Catholic.

Nathanson is scheduled to visit Rochester Saturday, Oct. 21, when he speaks at Brighton High School auditorium, 1150 Winton Road S. The title of his 1:30 p.m. talk will be "The Ninth Circle: The Healing Profession and Medical Abortions."

Sponsored by the St. Thomas the Apostle Pro-Life Group, the talk is free and open to the public. Call Mary Jo Maurer, 716/342-3216; Dorothy Hayes, 342-4175; or the Problem Pregnancy Help Center, Inc. 716/865-0360.

Titled "The Hand of God," Nathanson's book explaining his decision to become a Catholic is scheduled for release in February.

"Aborting America," written with the assistance of *Time* magazine religion editor Richard N. Ostling, told of Nathanson's background as the son of a Jew-

ish father who had renounced Orthodox Judaism.

Nathanson, now 69, said his father died in 1990 at age 94. "I didn't want to convert while my father was alive," he told Catholic News Service. "It would have been very traumatic for him."

When he wrote the earlier book, Nathanson considered himself a Jewish atheist who had come to his pro-life position by purely secular reasoning.

In an interview at his New York townhouse Sept. 5, he said that he had taken instruction and now considers himself a Catholic. He planned to be baptized as soon as he cleared up some personal matters.

In "Aborting America" Nathanson wrote that he had not been in a synagogue or any other house of worship since his bar mitzvah in 1939.

That period of avoiding any religious building ended with a visit to a Catholic church in Cleveland in 1983, he recalled in the interview. He said that a priest who attended a lecture he was giving sensed that he was under some personal strain.

"He said, why don't you stop at my church, so I did,"

Nathanson said. "I sat there and began my first attempts at prayer. I felt so relieved and so comforted." He then began visiting a Catholic church near his home, he said.

He had become one of the principal figures on the pro-life lecture circuit and in 1985 was planning to give some lectures in Europe. He said an official of the Archdiocese of New York asked him, "Why don't you get an audience with the pope?"

As a Jewish atheist, he did not imagine he could get an audience with the pope, he recalled. But a private audience with the pope was arranged for him.

"I think I was already considering conversion on some sort of visceral level," he said. "I came out of there inspired. What I was inspired to do or be, I didn't know."

Nathanson indicated an interest in Catholicism in "Aborting America." He reported the "careful scrutiny" he gave a Catholic fellow student who became his closest friend during

pre-medical studies at Cornell University.

In that book and in a later one, "The Abortion Papers" (Frederick Fell, 1983), Nathanson also told how, for tactical reasons, he and other leaders of NARAL — today called the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League — publicized their campaign as a fight against domination by the Catholic hierarchy. "I am heartily ashamed of the anti-Catholic ploy," he wrote in 1983.

For his formal instruction he began weekly meetings with a New York parish priest and continues to see him.

Nathanson also highlighted the influence of Cardinal O'Connor. "His role has been less visible than some others but more powerful," Nathanson said. "His spiritual dedication has been a tower of strength to me. His courage and unwavering consistency in the face of media outrage and groups like Catholics for a Free Choice, or cafeteria Catholics, has im-

pressed me enormously."

In "Aborting America," Nathanson held out the hope that advances in the technology of contraception might become the answer to abortion. "What is needed is a safe, inexpensive, single-administration, reversible, long-acting and easily administered contraceptive. A birth-control vaccine," he wrote.

In "The Abortion Papers," he said the 1968 encyclical on birth control helped the abortion campaign by tying the two issues together: "Let it be said: the church helped us in NARAL."

Today, Nathanson accepts the church's opposition to artificial contraception. "That was the last pin to fall," he said. "I had provided contraceptives all through my career."

"But becoming a Catholic, I want to be a Catholic," he said. "I don't want to be something that is neither here nor there. I'm not going to fashion a religion of my own."

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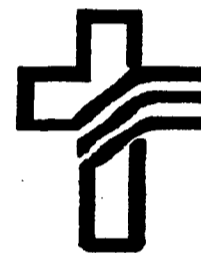
- "Love one another as I have loved you."
- "Do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you."
- "He who lives by the sword, will die by the sword."

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